Fighting Wild-Land Fires

Wild-land fires, natural-cover fires, brush fires, grass fires—they all mean the same thing: a long, hard day's work for firefighters. Whether you are a seasoned veteran or are a rookie, these fires bring out the best and worst in firefighting.

Since these fires are unpredictable and difficult to manage, it is often best to let them burn themselves out with the help of firebreaks, fire lines and backfires. Rough terrain, heavy underbrush, lack of roads for motorized equipment, and other hazardous conditions (for instance, unexploded ordnance) make fighting these fires an arduous and dangerous task. Usually, with a large-scale brush fire, there isn't enough manpower or equipment to make an aggressive attack. That is why training and planning are so important.

According to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, over the last 10 years, there were more than 1.63 million wild-land fires in the U.S. These fires destroyed more than 36.47 million acres of land.

In the last 15 years, 1,375 wild-land fires have destroyed almost $8.4 million worth of property belonging to the Department of Defense. If those fires hadn't been extinguished and had destroyed all the threatened property, the price tag would have been more than $339 million. These fires injured 165 people, including 85 firefighters.

Who could forget last summer's wild-land fires? One of the most notorious was the May fire in New Mexico. Originally an intentionally set fire, it got out of control and burned 47,650 acres, destroyed 235 structures, and damaged the Los Alamos National Laboratory. Even though the National Interagency Fire Center hasn't finished figuring the number and costs of these fires, the damage was extensive. However, they do have the figures for 1999. That year, there were 93,702 wild-land fires in the U.S., which destroyed 5.6 million acres of land and more than $99.1 million worth of property, both public and private. One of those fires was in California. It burned for almost three months, destroyed 86,700 acres, and caused the evacuation of hundreds of people.

Land and property aren't the only things destroyed by these fires. Untold numbers of animals are killed each year, and people have died. One of the most devastating fires in terms of loss of life was a fire that burned in Wisconsin and Michigan in October 1871. More than 1,500 people died in this fire.

If your base has areas that may be subject to wild-land fires, be sure you have a plan of attack. Don't take for granted that a grass or brush fire is easy to extinguish. Follow this four-step process when fighting wild-land fires:

First, with such a high percentage of wild-land fires caused by human carelessness, fire prevention is your first priority. Educate people on the devastating effects of these fires: the death of wild and domestic animals, destroyed homes and buildings, and eroded soil. It takes years for a forest or brush land to rebuild itself. Schools and community programs are good places to begin prevention campaigns. Children easily relate to the plight of animals caught in a fire, and they can encourage parents to try to prevent forest fires.

Second, suppress fires by making firebreaks, clearing roads, and locating water supplies before there is a fire. If you have large areas of woodland, cut fire lines to separate these areas into smaller

sections. Be sure roads are wide enough for your equipment. Cut overhanging vegetation that could damage the top of your equipment. Make sure you have rakes, shovels and backpacks. Usually, lightweight forestry hoses with small nozzles are best for brush fires.

Fire detection is the third important step. Most military installations don't have watchtowers to locate possible fire spots. But you can make periodic fire patrols. Drive through your wild-land areas or places where children play. These areas sometimes are hideouts where children play with matches or experiment with smoking. If you spot a fire, don't assume it will go out by itself—no matter how small it is. A smoldering log is just waiting for a gust of wind and a few dried leaves to ignite into a full-blown brush fire.

Finally, when fighting a wild-land fire, you must separate the fire from its fuel supply. It's not enough to just put out the fire. Usually, the fire area is too large for a complete overhaul, and the possibility of hidden embers and smoldering vegetation is very likely. If you don't already have firebreaks, clear the brush and scrape down to the soil around the fire area. Make sure the firebreak is wide enough so falling brush or trees won't cross the cleared areas. If natural fire barriers are available, such as roads or waterways, allow the fire to burn to the barriers. Then stand by to make sure it doesn't jump the line. Before leaving the area, make sure the fire is completely out.

There is a wide range of publications on wild-land and natural-cover firefighting. Check out the NFPA handbook, *IFSTA Ground Cover Firefighting Practices*, and NFPA 295 *Standard for Wildfire Control*. You also can get information from the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Interior, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), National Wildlife Coordinating Group, and the Canadian Forestry Service.

A firefighter uses a propane torch to create a firebreak in front of a wild-land fire. By burning brush between the fire and a trench dug by a tractor plow, the firebreak stops the advance of the fire.

Photo by Rae Mack